

Essay

“It just sort of evolved”: Negotiating Group Identity among Writers

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“We didn’t stage this just for you,” Alma said to me after the most dramatic night of my work observing and participating in the community-based writing group to which she belongs. I became associated with City Writers as part of an ethnography seminar. I am interested in extra-curricular writing in part because of Ann Ruggles Gere’s work, particularly “Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms” (1994). Gere argues that writing instruction “extends beyond the academy to encompass the multiple contexts in which persons seek to improve their own writing,” and that these extracurricular sites are often ignored by the field of composition. Non school-based learning is also the focus of work by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) who examine studies of apprenticeship and arrive at the phrase “legitimate peripheral participation” to describe how learners come to identify themselves with a community of practice as they move from the periphery to full participation in that practice. Learning is a sense of becoming. Other than learning knowledgeable skills, Lave and Wenger suggest that newcomers also learn “how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives;[. . .] what [oldtimers] enjoy, dislike, respect, and admire” (95).

Wenger’s *Communities of Practice* (1998) extends the situated view of learning in communities of practice by suggesting that apprenticeships are not the only site of learning through identification, but that “communities of practice are everywhere” (6). Regardless of whether the community of practice exists within formal institutions like school or informally, as in Internet chat rooms, the notion of communities of practice is basic to understanding learning as development. Lave and Wenger present theories of learning through identification, and not pedagogies: they are not suggesting what teachers should do in classrooms, but trying to illuminate what already always happens when and wherever people learn. Gere, too, does not suggest “appropriating the extracurriculum” (91) and importing it into the classroom, but noticing its presence and the value that writers find in their participation in such groups as City Writers.

Negotiating identity in any community of practice, in-school or out, takes place through a variety of mostly taken-for-granted means. Some of these means include the material setting, routine procedures, and ordinary ways of talking, including feedback and shared stories. When there is disruption, however, these negotiations can become overt and sometimes contentious, as they were for City Writers.

My understanding of the work of City Writers comes from an ethnographic study which lasted for twelve weeks, a tiny portion of their long history. At my first meeting, I identified myself to the group as a PhD student in Writing Studies who was interested in doing an ethnographic study of the group, and assured them that all attempts would be made to retain their anonymity. Throughout my time with the group I never received any negative comments or discouragement, and several times was asked how the research was going or when it will be finished or if it will eventually be published. Field notes are my main memory aid and source of information, although three times I audiotaped sessions and conducted three one-on-one interviews with group members. I also emailed members a brief questionnaire. I have read the work to group members for commentary and correction, relying heavily on their understanding of group dynamics and their recollection of group history.

The Setting

Gere suggests that writing's extracurriculum invites us to "rethink the relationship between physical and mental discipline" (87). The material setting of City Writers meetings is one way they routinely and silently negotiate their identity. They have been meeting in the same location every Tuesday night since 1980. City Writers is a community-based fiction-writers' workshop that is not affiliated with the University in this city, or with any religious or social organization or club, nor with a profit-making venture such as a large bookstore. The group was started with a small grant from the state's arts council, but City Writers no longer receives any form of public funding. Yvonne, the group's current moderator, briefly describes their membership this way: "Anyone can walk in that door." Membership is open to any adult in the community; there are no fees or forms associated with membership. No one takes roll at the meetings, no particular amount of writing is required per month, no communal writing exercises or joint projects are performed, no restrictions on the type/genre of work or the length of work is mandated. There is no mission statement or pledge. Prior publication is not a necessity, nor are plans for future publication. Even nonfiction/ nonpoetic work has been read, and seems to be a specialty with one member. Anyone can walk in the door on Tuesday night at 7:30, with or without work to read. Some people walk in just once and never appear again; some stay for years, some come and go over the years; one former member was suspected of more or less living in the meeting place.

The group meets on the premises of and with the support of a foundation housed in a local church. The foundation provides in-kind services, such as a meeting room, heat and air conditioning, and electricity; the foundation also provides some advertisement for the writing group and for all their other activities. Other groups which make use of the same facilities include a poetry workshop, actors' studio, drawing and painting classes, vegetarian restaurant and coffee shop. Meeting at this location is an indication that City Writers is serious, non-sectarian, artistic, slightly left-of-center, and interested in lifelong personal development. When Yvonne, the group's current moderator, gave me directions to my first meeting, she warned me in a joking way that a Life Drawing class was also held on Tuesday nights. If I opened the door off of the lobby and saw a nude model, I had chosen the wrong door. I chose the right door the following Tuesday at 7:20 and entered the Fireplace room.

It's a comfortable older room with a College Gothic feel: wood strip floor, plaster walls, exposed beams up to an arched ceiling. The incandescent light is bright yet warmer than fluorescent lights. Two floor lamps increase the non-institutional feel of the room. The meeting place itself is a tacit negotiation of the group's self-identity as serious writers. They do not meet in each other's homes, as some writing groups do—Yvonne was once a member of such a group—which would change the roles of the members from readers

and writers to host and guests. The fireplace room is private, so no one can just wander through on the way to some other room or to the bathroom. Groups that meet in large bookstores, for example, have to contend with shoppers passing by. Bob recalled his brief visit to a bookstore-sponsored writing group as having too much public exposure. The fireplace room is nicely divided into two halves by the exposed beams. On the fireplace end are two cushioned couches and two cushioned chairs, a wooden bench and several wooden chairs. This is not where the City Writers work.

They sit around a large, plain wooden table on plain wooden chairs at the other end of the room. About a dozen chairs can comfortably fit around the table, and attendance at any one meeting seldom exceeds that. Each meeting lasts for 2 1/2 hours, and I at first wondered at the endurance of these people to maintain a position on those chairs for that long, but they are committed to their enterprise and engaged in the night's activities. I don't want to make too much—or too little—of the hard chairs, but they do not invite lounging, and the presence of a table invites note taking more than a lap does, which would be the case if the group sat in the cushioned chairs near the fireplace. Tables and chairs might also be reminders of schooling, especially college seminars, and the architecture of the room is reminiscent of College Gothic. I noticed that, and Yvonne confirmed that, several of the members inadvertently refer to the meetings as “school.”

Group members were dressed casually—not a silk and suit crowd—either because that's how they dress for work or they had a chance to change before the 7:30 meeting. The readings and feedback were conducted quietly, seriously, in an orderly way, and with humor. Anyone who wanted to speak got a chance. It was a congenial group altogether, and by the end of the first meeting, I felt like I was in familiar terrain: graduate seminar. And like most seminars I've attended, it was also an overwhelmingly white, non-Hispanic, 30-60 group.

Routine Procedures

“It's fairly typical,” was how Kathy described the transcription of a Tuesday session that was the subject of my interview with her. Members start arriving at about 7:20 and wait in the anteroom until the moderator arrives with the key. Almost everyone is carrying something: a notebook or briefcase or portfolio; some carry bottles of water. Food and drink are not routine parts of the Tuesday meetings; although they may appear on special occasions. There are greetings and the kind of general informal talk that almost any group of people engages in: How are you doing? How's the work going? Very seldom have I heard members ask about each other's occupations or families because the point of their meetings is to give and receive feedback about writing. As we go into the fireplace room, everyone seems to have a preferred seat, but there is no sense of assigned seats. Some are more flexible with seating; some choose the same place each week. I am of the latter group, as are Yvonne and Alma, who has a walking aid. Every once in a while members will joke about someone sitting in someone else's seat. Most members will be seated by about 7:35, but some arrive later for a variety of reasons, including difficulty finding a parking spot. During my weeks of observation, several members routinely arrived about half way through the meeting because of job schedules and chose to sit in the cushioned seats near the fire place, so as not to interrupt the work in progress at the table.

Once everyone is in the room and seated, the night's work begins promptly. By about 7:35, Yvonne will begin the meeting by passing around the table information about workshops, publication venues, readings in town, fiction contests. Often this is in the form of *Writer* magazine or a small literary journal. Last year's edition of *Writers' Market*—a 5-inch thick volume—appeared a few times. If anyone has specific questions about

possible workshops or specific publication venues, Yvonne is sure to bring the appropriate information the next week. Other members occasionally share information, usually related to another's specific work at the time. Passing out general information seems to be mainly the function of the moderator, who is always sure to ask if anyone has announcements of general interest before the meeting proceeds. Yvonne then asks who has work to read that night, and about how many pages. She notes all answers, and refers to last week's list to make sure that anyone leftover from last week goes first this week. Readings proceed in an orderly fashion; there is no pause while someone volunteers to go next. Part of membership etiquette seems to be that if you have missed a meeting or so, you will not expect to read the night you return, if others are waiting. There is generally time for three members to read each Tuesday night.

The City Writers read their work aloud, usually from a typed manuscript, but occasionally a hand-written work will appear. Members of this group do not photocopy their work and hand it around; the audience must listen. One reason for this is simple logistics: it's hard to tell on any given night how many copies would be needed, or if copies were handed around the week in advance, there's no guarantee that those same members will make it to the next meeting. Depending on the kind of work, each reading can take from 10 minutes for a short story up to 45 minutes for a chapter of a novel. Most members jot down some brief notes while listening, so they can make appropriate comments. Most readers take notes on their manuscripts while they are reading. Reading aloud can prompt writers to change word choices or notice other small mistakes. My experience is that most readers are expressive, and give their characters voice; very seldom is the reader flat or monotonous. Occasionally a member will request the reader to speak a little louder or to slow down—one night we had a university student in the meeting who read very rapidly. If other groups are using the foundation's meeting rooms, like the actors' studio or the coffee shop, the room can be slightly noisy, but I never found the noise too intrusive. Yvonne has at times spoken to foundation board members about the noise. Other than comments about volume or speed, listeners never interrupt a reading. Commentary only begins when the reader is finished.

City Writers see themselves as "a writing group first, and friends second," as Yvonne remarked. Tuesday night is devoted to the business of writing. People very rarely get up from the table during a meeting unless they are leaving for the night. If members enter after the meeting is in progress, they quietly wait near the fireplace if someone is reading, in order not to interrupt. It's not like walking into a party. It's also not like walking into a classroom. City Writers do not perform writing exercises or group writing activities. This might reflect the diversity of writing style and genres, and it might reflect how City Writers think writing is best learned: by writing and getting a wide range of response, not by breaking up the process of writing into discrete units. There are no lessons, and there is no teacher in the group. Yvonne is the moderator, and I think she is a very perceptive listener—she has been invited to give workshop and lectures, and she has taught writing formally—but she is not by any means the sole respondent. Jean and Rachel have both said that they value many kinds of response, from attention to word choice to accurate details to pacing.

The fact that people will routinely come to the table with a variety of works, such as short stories—including mysteries, science fiction, flash fiction— novels, screenplays, and memoirs, reinforces that this group is devoted to all genres and even to work that others might deem offensive. Yvonne remarked in an email to me that "we have heard all manner of politically incorrect work, paranoid ravings, graphic heterosexual and homosexual scenes, etc" because of their commitment to responding to each work in itself. Because this group views itself as serious writers, the type of fiction that members seemed most hesitant about reading were what Bob referred to as "warm and fuzzy" stories that several members were entering into the local newspaper's fiction contest.

They joked after such stories were read that they were getting nauseated from all the sugar, and one member made a gagging motion after reading a sentimental piece. (Bob's story about a bell which has meaning for several generations of a family won fourth place.)

Most members arrive *without* work to read each Tuesday night because this group values the contributions of a serious audience. Being a good listener is a valuable skill. When we were talking about group etiquette, Kathy said that "it's not fair for me to go in just so I can read my own stuff. If I'm going to expect contributions from other people I need to carry my weight." Feedback is a cooperative venture between reader and listeners. I have heard of some writing groups and writing classrooms in which the reader is not allowed to speak until all listeners have commented in turn. That's not how City Writers work. Feedback here is a series of mini-conversations: listeners want to make sure the reader understands their reaction; readers want to make sure they understand what it was in the work that prompted that reaction. Group members also expressed a need to come to meetings even without work to read because they still learn from feedback to other members' work. They like to know, and benefit from, what others are working on and how their work is being received. Even silent attention is a valid form of participation.

Feedback and Stories

The group's identity is also routinely negotiated through the kind of talk that happens around the table. The point of attending meetings is to talk about writing. "I need feedback from an audience" was typical of the responses I got when I asked group members why they attend the Tuesday meetings. Kathy gave a nice description of the process during an interview: "they will focus on a problem . . . and then try to come up with ways to help me fix it . . . frequently that's interspersed with comments about something that they really like." She said that "in trying to impart information the dynamic becomes almost a negotiation." Since the works are heard, not seen, comments are generally global in nature: issues of character development, plot and pacing, description or lack thereof; but, sometimes word choice or factual inaccuracies are noted. Readers will occasionally ask for specific kinds of comments; Jean asked members if a chapter of her novel was "too long and boring." Yvonne read an article she wrote for a writers' magazine one night, and asked the group if her advice was clear and usable, or if her categories were distinct. If a member reads a rewrite of a work previously read to the group, he or she will ask something along the lines of, Did I fix what you mentioned? Most commentary seems to be stated in terms of what did or did not work for the listeners, what effect the work had on them. After Jean read a chapter one night, a listener responded: "I needed something different."

The reader and listeners engage in conversation about the text: what the writer was trying to achieve and how, what the listeners heard and why. Most readers make notes on their manuscripts of points their listeners raised. Seldom have I heard readers become defensive or insist that the piece works if listeners say it does not. There is a good balance between positive comments and suggestions for changes and improvements. If commentary seems to be slowing down, the moderator asks whether anyone else has something to say. Not every member makes comments on every work read; it is not a requirement. Some seldom comment.

Since this is a fiction workshop, the issue of character motivation is a nearly constant focus of commentary. Listeners respond by either agreeing or disagreeing that real live people would act like the characters in the fiction do. One night Kathy read a chapter from her novel about two lovers who had been separated for almost a year. The man

was on his way to see his lost love after discovering her whereabouts. This is part of the feedback Kathy received:

David: "If it was me, I wouldn't wait a second. I would get in there. [the changes the woman has gone through] hit him like a sledge hammer I suppose because he wouldn't have been prepared, but I don't see him hanging back if he's been anticipating this moment, for what, three seasons?"

Yvonne: "He is a man of action; you've established him as a man of action."

Dorothy read a chapter from a mystery novel one night, and much of the discussion then centered on whether the main character acted in a believable way given the circumstances she was in.

The nature of feedback is not a straightforward issue. It is at the heart of the City Writers, and can be cause for conflict. This is a group with few rules and no formal policy statement or goals. This is not to say that members arrive with no notion of how to be a City Writer. The many years of schooling that members come to the group with might be a tacit model for appropriate response. The many years that group members have known each other can also help maintain a continuity of identity and a bond that extends beyond the Tuesday meetings. Just because I do not know much about members' families or jobs is not an indication that they do not know about each other. When I asked her about this in an interview, Yvonne remarked that "most of us who've been there awhile have made good friends out of the group." Members keep in touch through email and telephone; they invite one another to functions like book signings and readings, and even to family functions such as weddings. Champagne birthday celebrations are not unknown on an occasional Tuesday night. The group members share a history.

City Writers are aware of having a past and tell stories often about past members and past events. I heard the first of many stories on my first Tuesday with the writers about a former member who could never quite progress beyond first chapters; he would continually rewrite openings and read them to the group, but never go further. The group jokingly suggested that he was attempting to create a new literary genre: the first chapter. The context of this story was Jean's frustration about some of the feedback she received. Everyone agreed that writing well is hard work and the group began a discussion about the relative benefits of working on one section until it seemed perfect, or leaving that section for a while in order to go forward with the whole novel.

Stories, histories, are always told in context, in an attempt to use the past to speak to the present moment. Such histories help orient newcomers to how the group operates, and consolidates group identity for long-term members. The history of City Writers is not the institutional history of groups such as the Girl Scouts, which gets part of its identity from a core set of beliefs or pledges, but a history of individual members who act in specific ways to identify what it means—what it has historically meant—to be a City Writer.

Extraordinary Negotiations

Gere's description of extracurricular writing might leave readers with the impression that such groups are completely supportive, even loving. Lave and Wenger's "community of practice" might also be open to interpretation as conflict-free and nurturing, but Lave and Wenger provide a more complicated notion of communities of practice. Conflict is an integral part of communities of practice, which Lave and Wenger describe as "historically constructed, ongoing, conflicting, synergistic structuring of activity and relations among practitioners" (56). In some practices, there is an inherent conflict between the goals of

newcomers and masters in terms of continuity and displacement. Old-timers need newcomers in order to continue the practice, and yet know that they will be replaced by those newcomers as they become full participants with the help of the masters. Wenger, too, points out that “connotations of peaceful coexistence, mutual support, or interpersonal allegiance are not assumed, though of course they may exist in specific cases. Peace, happiness, and harmony are therefore not necessary properties of a community of practice” (77). The City Writers were not immune to contentious negotiations regarding their identity, their goals as group, and the nature of feedback.

One issue which can become a subject of disagreement was referred to by Jean as “the p-word”: publication. By beginning each meeting with references to publication venues, Yvonne is tacitly negotiating her view of group goals as publication. She is highly committed to the workshop, which she credits with her many publication successes: several “pulp” novels, poems, two collections of literary short stories, numerous articles.

She remarked in an email questionnaire I sent to members that I had not asked about “professional results,” which she thought was unfortunate “because of course everyone wants to get published” even though that is a long and difficult journey for a writer. Others in the group share this as a personal goal. Dan wrote that “I didn’t take this seriously when I was younger, and as a result I’ve wasted precious time and retarded my development as a serious writer,” but that “my goal has always been to become a professional writer.” David feels the same: “My goal is to sell one or more screenplays so that I can write full time.” Not all group members see publication as the motivating factor in their writing, although I think everyone would, indeed, like to be published. Jean says she does not think of publication. Kathy said of her novel in progress, “I hope it gets published, but I have often said and I sincerely mean it, I may never get published but I will have had a lot of fun along the way.” When Yvonne asked William if he had any plans for his growing collection of reminiscences, he said he did not really have publication in mind, and that if he only leaves them for his family to read, he would be satisfied.

Group members have a variety of individual goals that range from William’s satisfaction with simply reading his work to others, to Yvonne’s growing list of well-accepted publications. The identity of City Writers as either interested dilettantes or deeply committed professionals became a topic of overt and conflicting discussion beginning one dramatic Tuesday night. “Nothing like this has ever happened” was Yvonne’s response to the incident. I want to contextualize the events a bit.

Joe had been absent from the group for several weeks, after reading the final chapter of his novel when he last attended. Prior to Joe’s reading that night, William excused himself and left the meeting. My suspicion then was that William was uncomfortable with the explicit sexual nature of Joe’s work. He later confirmed that suspicion by referring to Joe’s book as “pornography.” After his reading, Joe asked the group for general comments by stating what he hoped to accomplish with the novel and asking if the audience perceived his work that way. The reaction was mixed, as reaction generally seems to be. I commented that I didn’t “get” some of the visual metaphor he used in part of the story, although I had liked much of the novel. There were some comments about his lead female character, that she was perhaps not as sympathetic as the audience might have liked; she was a bit cold. Conrad remarked that Joe’s characters were too stereotypical for him and that Joe made too much use of “tropes” or stock situations. This perhaps lukewarm reception—at least from Joe’s point of view—might help explain Joe’s actions weeks later. Yvonne later suggested that Joe was highly personally invested in his work, and that there might have been no way for the group, for anyone, to appreciate it enough.

The dramatic Tuesday began with a reading by William, who had been working on a series of memoirs, short stories recollecting events of his past, of his boyhood in the 1930s. Yvonne began the commentary by suggesting that the story could use some dramatizing, more descriptive details. Others suggested that William should add some dialogue. Then Joe began. He pointed out fault after fault with William's story: clichéd expressions, short choppy sentences, lack of details. Joe said he was disappointed that after attending the workshop for 10 years, William's stories were still so easy to find fault with. He suggested, in short, that William was not really trying to learn from group commentary, and that perhaps a handbook such as *The Elements of Style* would help. Joe felt that if the group continued to accept stories like William's, it would "dumb down" the group. Joe then began to criticize William's style of responding to others' work as being too picky about unimportant details—did a 1956 Chevrolet have tail fins—and derailing more important conversation.

It was a vindictive attack that embarrassed me and other group members. It was clear to us, as I later confirmed, that Joe came prepared to raise issues. He read from prepared notes when he talked to William, and he appeared agitated; his voice and hands trembled. Contrary to usual procedures, Joe did not give William time to respond to his "feedback," to ask questions, to seek clarification. There was no attempt on Joe's part to have a conversation. Joe went on to criticize William for leaving meetings early, and William felt he had to defend his actions by saying that he had a medication schedule to follow and that he did not like to leave his wife alone at night for too long. Prior to this night group members had never felt the need to excuse themselves for not attending or for arriving late or leaving early on the rare occasions that happened. Joe did not let William off the hook and said that, as a physician, he doubted that anyone's medication schedule was so rigorous. Rachel felt Joe had gone too far, and interrupted.

The issues that Joe raised were taken up as issues of group identity. Whose work will be valued? What will be seen as acceptable? What kinds of response are appropriate? What group behaviors will be tolerated? What is the point of attending meetings for readers and non-readers? One way these issues were negotiated that night was standard for City Writers: by references to group history. In the absence of formal rules, precedent becomes a basis for decision-making. Of the stories about past members and events that I heard, many seemed to refer to some sense of a harsher, more critical past and a comfortable, reformed present. I think what Joe did that Tuesday was seen as an attempt to resurrect a past which had been rejected.

A Harsh Past

I had a brief glimpse at that past even before I met with City Writers. When I called the public library to find information about community writing groups, one of the telephone numbers the librarian gave me was for Yvonne, who was very supportive—then and throughout—of my project with City Writers. The other telephone number was for a woman who used to be part of a workshop that met in a nearby town, but she informed me that the group no longer met, that the library had some outdated information. As I chatted with the woman and told her that I had found City Writers as a site for my project, she hesitated because she did not want to "spread gossip" but felt she ought to warn me about that group. She had attended a meeting of the City Writers once, and only once, some years ago. The woman read her work to the group and received such harsh negative feedback that she never went back, and furthermore stopped writing for several years. At some time in its history, the group was not a supportive place to read.

Current members who have been with the group for years will not deny that City Writers was once harsh: Kathy recalls that "it was a tougher group, then." City Writers seem to

understand that writing groups in general can have a hard time maintaining a balance between helpful feedback and destructive feedback. Several members have had direct or indirect experience with other writing groups. Dan thinks it's important to "seek out workshops that have a relaxed, casual atmosphere; it's more conducive to creativity." Bob recalls that he "came to this group somewhat apprehensively because I had heard horror stories about writer's groups in which fledgling authors would suffer the 'death of a thousand cuts'." Bob later gave me a printout from a website about a writing group in another state and its attempts to maintain appropriate feedback. Another member realizes that "there are many pros and cons about workshops," but thinks they are worthwhile. Writing classrooms, too, can be harmful to writers if they are unlucky enough to have an instructor like the one Rachel recalled the week after that dramatic Tuesday; her instructor showed his disdain for a student's work by gesturing that it should be used as toilet paper and discarded. On the other side of the balance are writing groups like one that Yvonne belonged to for a while which was "too nurturing and supportive"; it was not at all challenging and not meant to be challenging to anyone's comfort level. Grace has also had less-than-helpful experience with other groups: "I've tried other writing groups in [this city] but the [City Writers] is the only one I've encountered where people are doing serious writing and will accept criticism."

At some time in its past, however, City Writers was seen to go beyond serious criticism to something like Joe dished out to William. Several weeks before that event, I briefly addressed the group about my interest in the kinds of responses group members find valuable, and Yvonne told a story of a former member who was less than pleased with the kind of response he had been getting from the others. The group saw its role at that time as preparing beginning writers for the kind of harsh rejection they might face from editors and/or larger audiences. One night this man, who had admittedly been treated harshly by group members, came to the meeting and silently gave each member a Xeroxed copy of part of John Gardner's work, *The Art of Fiction*, which dealt with how writers' groups are *supposed* to behave. The motion Yvonne made as she told the story was that he slapped down each copy in front of each member. It was his way of protesting what he saw as excessively rough treatment from what should have been a supportive group. As she told the story other members who had been in the group then confirmed that in those days the group had indeed become too harsh and too personal. A newer member of City Writers asked if things had changed much after that, and Yvonne replied that "we were in too much of a downward spiral by then," but have since modified their stance with the coming and going of members.

Kathy recalled that the problems within the group might have been a clash of personalities, too; that man was, she recalled, a sort of know-it-all who never hesitated to point out inaccuracies in other members' work. Whatever the cause, Kathy remembers that newcomers to the group were not always treated well: "Many years ago, first readings were a kind of trial by fire, and anyone whose skill didn't suggest promise was hung out to dry—if someone was thick-skinned enough to stick with it, he or she was eventually accepted, though comments on other members' work may have been summarily dismissed." She survived that trial because members saw potential in her work, suggesting that, though unpolished, it was "rich." It was this time in the group's history, this critical past, that Yvonne recalled when I spoke to her about audience awareness: do writers keep their audience in mind as they work? She said that she does keep audience in mind in "several ways and sometimes to my detriment." Audience awareness can also hold a writer back from what she wants to do. When the group contained some very vocal critics, other writers would "internalize" those criticisms, which prevented them from exploring options for character or plot development for fear of what others would say.

Seeking Balance

This harshly critical past seemed to return with Joe's feedback to William. These must have been the echoes his words set off. Would City Writers return to that style? Would they maintain their current style? Was it time for a change? Joe was certainly well aware of this past or aware of the potential for a different kind of writing group, a more selective group. He had been a member for about three years and recalled that, early on in his time with City Writers, Rachel herself was a harsh critic of a certain member at that time. When Rachel interrupted his commentary about William, Joe accused her of, in effect, once doing just what he had done and worse. I didn't have my recording equipment that night—alas!—but I recall Joe saying something like, "I heard you night after night slam Adam [the former member]." But for Rachel there was a critical distinction between Joe's commentary that night and her own commentary years ago: she had never crossed the line from critiquing the work to critiquing the person.

When I asked Rachel about the Joe-incident, she said that his accusation about her feedback to the former member hurt her deeply. She agreed that she was critical of Adam's work, but it was of his work, not his character. Rachel telephoned Adam—reminding me once again of how much contact members and former members have with one another outside of the meetings—to ask him whether her feedback is what made him stop attending City Writers. He reassured Rachel that she was in no way responsible, that he never felt she had crossed that line to personal attack.

Apparently one unwritten, but often repeated, "rule" of City Writers is "all we can deal with is the work on the page." Yvonne said that the former group moderator repeated that phrase almost ad nauseam. But Rachel clarified this policy for me somewhat. Aside from dealing with the work, members clearly also deal with each other's personalities and perceived needs. Rachel told of a member, Nadia, who read a story about a childhood spent in a war-torn country. This woman was clearly from a foreign country herself; she had an accent. Her story was so touching, so full of fear and pathos that members of the workshop hesitated to offer substantive feedback. Members inferred that this story was autobiographical and that Nadia was dealing with difficult memories. For Rachel, their hesitation was a simple act of kindness; the City Writers felt that the last thing this woman needed was someone picking apart her memories. To conclude the story, Nadia privately expressed frustration at the lack of feedback to Rachel, who openly told her why the group was so reluctant. Nadia is still an occasional member of the group.

In the discussion that followed Joe's comments, Yvonne talked about the difficult balance that groups like City Writers strive to maintain. She referred to their harsh past as one end of the balance which she did not want to return to, saying that group members work under "an unwritten social contract" to help each other, not to end anyone's writing career. Their unwritten contract includes kindness, and this is one issue Rachel and Joe clearly disagreed upon. Not only was Joe's critical feedback to William unhelpful to his growth as a writer, it was also unkind. But Yvonne also felt that perhaps the group was losing its edge. She and Rachel had been in email conversation about this topic recently, and felt that not enough members were giving enough serious feedback to each other. William also agreed that the group seemed to have become a bit too soft; he said he appreciated Joe's comments, and everyone's: "I can take it."

Yvonne was afraid that group members are not pushing each other's limits, and not preparing each other for publication. She did not want members "failing out of the wider world" because group members had not told them that their work was not succeeding. To back up her description of a balanced approach, Yvonne told a story. A former group member who was not given the critical advice he really needed then attended a

weekend writers' conference in another state. This former member was dismayed at the feedback his work received. But for now, City Writers seem to feel comfortable with the balance they have achieved. I did not notice a dramatically different kind of feedback either for the remainder of the dramatic Tuesday or in the weeks to follow.

Joe took a sabbatical from City Writers, by a sort of mutual agreement he and Yvonne discussed. He phoned and emailed Yvonne with general apologies to the group. At the next meeting, William also reported that Joe phoned him with apologies. Alma, ever generous, expressed some sympathy for Joe and wondered if he would be okay. Others were somewhat less sympathetic, and did not want City Writers to return to its former state. Several weeks later, William was again the first reader for the night. Alma now sat in the chair Joe occupied weeks before. As William began, she jokingly leaned across the table and repeated Joe's opening words on that other night: "How long have you been in the group?" Everyone laughed with the sort of relief that seems to come from comfortable recollection of former tension. The City Writers seemed glad that that incident was over. But of course, anyone can walk back in that door on Tuesday.

Classroom Identity

Writing and identity, both personal and group identity, were intertwined concerns for the City Writers, as they are for all writers, including academic writers. Lave and Wenger stress that all human activity—including writing and learning—is situated and requires that people act from a role or position, such as that of student. Everyone inhabits multiple roles throughout the day and throughout life, and very often these identities are assumed without question or problem. To their benefit, the City Writers were able to have quite overt discussions of group identity, prompted by one member's ability to question the prevailing practices. Aside from openness to identity issues, the City Writers were also well aware of their individual and collective ability to shape their identity: they knew their own history not as one imposed on them by others, but as a history of self-propelled change. Academic and professional writers often do not feel such agency. Students or newcomers to professional practices are entering writing situations where identities are already set and into which they must fit themselves, and negotiating group identity may be difficult or unavailable. Fitting in can be a lengthy and frustrating task, one in which writing instructors can perhaps play a helpful role.

Roz Ivanic's study of Rachel Dean, an older student returning to university for a degree in social work, focuses on Rachel's struggle to achieve, in and through her writing, the identity of professional social worker. Rachel had to learn to talk like a social worker "even though she felt extremely ambivalent about her identity as an apprentice social worker" (156). Ivanic sees that Rachel was quite aware of "playing a game" and taking on the role of the professional in her writing, even if she was not yet very good at the game. This student writer had to balance her self-presentation with what she understood to be the profession's values: she had to negotiate her personal and professional identities. Unfortunately, Rachel's teachers did not see what Ivanic saw: Rachel struggling to achieve this balance, this "discoursally constructed" identity (168). The teachers only saw a student with ineffective study skills. Ivanic's hope is that her study of Rachel Dean will give teachers a better understanding of "just how complex and sophisticated a set of knowledges and understandings a writer needs to deploy when engaging in academic literacy practices" (168). Becoming a proficient writer in any community of practice, curricular or extra-curricular, means learning more than appropriate formats; it also means learning to take on the identity and values of experienced community members. One way to facilitate this move is to explicitly talk about the role expectations involved, to point out that they are an effect of history and that assuming a professional or student identity does not negate all of the other identities

humans always have.

Academic literacy practices do not begin in college classrooms, but even younger students must learn to take on the identity of literate students in a classroom community of practice. Lesley Rex and David McEachen apply Lave and Wenger's situated learning viewpoint to a high school literature classroom. They describe students as apprentices in learning not just how to read but how to be good readers in that particular class. Analysis of classroom interaction shows how students learn without being obviously taught what counts as a good reading, a good question, a proper attitude toward others' readings. Through dialog with the teacher, and increasingly with other students, students came to identify themselves with the literacy practices of that classroom. In consonance with the view of learning as coming to identify with a community of practice, Rex and McEachen note that "students' actions in learning academic English literacy occur at the level of identity, selfhood, and personality" (71). The challenge to acquire this identity was facilitated by the teacher who modeled the behavior of close textual reading to "make a case" for a particular reading. All cases were equally valid as long as they were textually supported. Even a student was allowed to have a more authoritative reading than the teacher, as long as that reading followed classroom norms for being textually based. During one exchange in which a student provided a more accurate close reading of a text than the teacher provided, the teacher took the opportunity to affirm the student's good work and to regain his authority by incorporating the student's reading into his own continuing understanding of the text.

Student writers and City Writers gain their proficiency through the same process: identification with valued practices of a community. Sometimes the negotiation of that identity is tacit, as with the arrangement of furniture, citation practices, or unquestioned roles. Sometimes the negotiations can become more overt, as in a tutorial session, a class discussion, or telling stories around a table in the fireplace room. The view of learning presented by Gere and Lave and Wenger allow us to see individual development as a seamless, lifelong process of becoming. Whether the community of practice includes a professional teacher or not, newcomers can become experts by finding meaning in the practice. Gere urges us to question the role of formal instruction in learning, to "scrutinize the culture of professionalism" (87). However, when we do engage in professional writing instruction, we might see our task as one of providing newcomers with the resources they need—materials, time, a sense of the overall goals of practice, history, access to expert peers, motivation, protection—to become full participants in the community of practice.

—Teresa Bruckner

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